

# The THOREAU SOCIETY

## BULLETIN

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### THOREAU IN ISRAEL by Irving Halperin

Thoreau in Israel? Yes, he is very much alive for a number of students at the Hebrew University and Haifa College. At least this is my impression after having recently taught at both institutions. I was in Israel on a sabbatical leave when Professor Adam Mendilow, Chairman of the Hebrew University's English Department, invited me to teach a Poe-Thoreau course in Jerusalem and an Emerson-Thoreau course at Haifa College.

Who were the students? At Haifa College there were some twenty mature people in the class. Several had emigrated to Israel from European countries during the Hitler years. A few were elementary and secondary teachers of English who had once lived in Canada, the United States, England and South Africa. The others were native born Israelis. As to the students in the course at the Hebrew University, they were in their late twenties. Most of them had served the required two year stint in the Israeli army, an experience which seems to produce highly self-disciplined and purposeful men and women. Some had spent at least a summer travelling and studying in European countries. They were representative of Israel's student elite, for admission standards at Hebrew University are formidable, and the excellent faculty there has a reputation for expecting high-level performance from the student body.

Well, how did they respond to Thoreau? Enthusiastically, generally speaking. But there were some detractors. To begin with, an able student in Haifa was critical of Thoreau's stay at Walden. In one of her papers, she argued that by going there he had evaded his "responsibilities as a member of society." Herself married, a mother of three children, she was especially impatient with the Walden experiment because Thoreau was a bachelor. "As a single man," she wrote, "he could afford to observe chipmunks and go fishing without worrying about how his children would be fed." I have some understanding of what probably lay behind her comment. Like many Israeli women, she works a long, hard week. So she both envied and resented the full, unhurried days in which Thoreau calmly gazed at waterbugs skimming over the pond's surface or went on all night walks. "A broad margin to his life, indeed!" she said after class on one occasion. "Well, here in Israel we can't afford to be ladies and gentlemen of leisure. Not if we want to eat and pay the rent. We have to work hard just to get by. That's why I don't much care for Thoreau's preaching simplicity, simplicity. Also, where would Israel be if many Israelis left their jobs, and went off by themselves to the Negev to contemplate? Our enemies would then massacre us in short order. Besides, I think that

The Thoreau Society, Inc., is an informal gathering of students and followers of Henry David Thoreau. Mrs. Herbert Hosmer, Concord, Mass., president; Robert Needham, Concord, Mass., vice-president; Walter Harding, State University College, Geneseo, New York, secretary-treasurer. Annual membership, \$2.00; life membership, \$25.00.

sometimes it's harder and more courageous to stay at home and try to improve conditions than it is to escape to another place."

Fortunately, this was not her last word on the matter. In the last days of the course, she began to speak favorably of Thoreau's achievement. And in her final paper, she wrote: "Thoreau came to the woods not in order to escape society and his social responsibilities but in order to be able to confront himself. This surely is one of the bravest things a man can do."

But if this student eventually saw the light, this was not the case with someone else in the Haifa class. She referred to Thoreau as a "loner" and took issue with his censure of certain philanthropic practices in his time, as witness the following passage from one of her papers:

This aspect of Thoreau's beliefs is contrary to the Jewish way of life. The Jewish religion does regard the individual as all important, but from a perspective quite different from that of Thoreau's. The emphasis is always on what a person can do for his neighbors, not for himself. Thus we find in our teachings the saying--"He who saves one soul, it is as if he had saved an entire world." To withdraw from society is to negate the Rabbinic saying--don't separate yourself from the community. In fact, the whole of Jewish life is based on doing good for others--helping the stranger as well as one's neighbor. And in this sense, Thoreau failed his community.

Thoreau was no less unpopular with a student in Jerusalem who criticized him for being "anti-progress". This student was strongly in favor of an ultra-mechanized and industrialized Israel. And, in his mind, Thoreau had said some hard things about the railroad, factories, cities. In one of his papers there was this statement:

I am quite skeptical about his ideas against mechanization and industrialization. The primitive Indians, in their wigwams, hunting their food, might have been happier than we are. But one should not forget the advantages obtained by men's technical achievements. We cannot draw away and forget what we know about aircraft, washing machines and cars. I think that he misunderstood the realities of this modern world. We in Israel especially have to advance quickly.

But altogether, as I indicated previously, there were only a sprinkling of detractors; clearly the majority of students on both campuses were impressed with Thoreau. However, some were almost too concerned with his strictures against the materialism of his time and to the extent that they seemed applicable to trends in Israeli life.



I recall, for example, the informal paper written by a student at Haifa in which she expressed the opinion that Israelis--who in her eyes are becoming increasingly "Americanized"--have much to learn from Thoreau.

I do not think he was right when he said that trousers should be patched over and over again. Why not buy a new pair when the old one gets thin or torn? But is it a crime to throw away good things just because they have been worn for several times? Thoreau himself needed very little. Unlike so many ladies who will never again wear their present winter clothing next winter. The trouble with this way of indulging in luxuries is that it is contagious. During the last fifteen years it has penetrated Israel as well. I remember the time when a family was happy to have a two room flat; now four or five are not enough. And why? Because somebody else has more. Hence Thoreau's statement: "It is the dissipated who set the fashions which the herd so diligently follow."

An appreciation of Thoreau for wider and more discerning reasons was held by a former American in the Jerusalem class. He especially admired the writer's belief in the importance of walking close to Nature. "I can appreciate what Thoreau felt when he left the streets and houses of his village and took to the fields and woods beyond Concord," he once said to me. "But unfortunately, here in Israel we can't easily find solitude by leaving the cities. There are so few green spots in the country. Having been born in a country where woods and water are abundant, I have long suffered from their sparseness in Israel. We have only one lake, Lake Kinneret, and this is not easily accessible."

One of the most interesting students in Haifa, an unusually knowing, sensitive woman formerly from Poland, the only survivor of her entire family, which was destroyed by the Germans during the war, disagreed with the view that Israel does not contain the kinds of physical terrain conducive to solitude and contemplation. "There is much peace to be found by walking along the sea shore or in the hills of Judaea or the Galilee or over the plateaus above Lake Kinneret," she wrote in a letter to me. And I should like to conclude this report by citing a passage from it.

I happen to be in Tiberias, and because we planned a hike at seven o'clock in the morning, I was fully awakened before five. So I left my room and went to sit for an hour on the shore of Lake Kinneret. It was still dark, the water had a dash of silver and it was still. One could hear the quietness. It enwrapped me. Fishermen in boats were coming to the shore and they looked like birds. I asked myself where I had read about such a moment. Yes, it was in Thoreau, and then I realized that what I felt sitting on the shore was the identical feeling I have when reading Thoreau. Looking at the Kinneret, I enjoy the present moment with all my senses--the way he would.

No Israeli could have given Thoreau a warmer tribute.  
San Francisco State College

#### ELLERY CHANNING'S COPY OF A WEEK by William Strutz

In 1962, the writer obtained from a good friend who is a rare book dealer in New York City, a unique copy of the first edition of Thoreau's Letters to Various Persons, 1865. The copy once belonged to William Ellery Channing. The acquisition of this item, as is usual when one purchases rare books, was

attended by a happy combination of time, place and personal acquaintance.

William Ellery Channing inscribed his name, "Channing" on the title-page. On page 97 of the copy, Channing penciled a marginal note which draws attention to the difference between a couplet (from Samuel Daniel) as quoted by Thoreau in a letter to H. G. O. Blake and the same couplet as quoted by Thoreau on page 400 of the first edition of A Week on the Concord and Merrimac Rivers. The note in Channing's hand reads:

Unless above himself he can  
Erect himself, how poor a thing is man  
So given by H. 'Week', 400.

Channing, on page 101, has written a marginal notation, which reads:

You must not only aim aright,  
But draw the bow with all your might".

Finally, on two terminal blank leaves, Channing has noted a dozen items that interested him and given the page references. On the first of these two pages, the notes read as follows:

189 stone chunk yard -  
98 lying -  
105 strangers  
119 letter writing  
139 society  
145 sense of existence  
159 depression of spirits  
183 use of a house  
213 if I but love  
214 Let such pure hate  
10 grief.

On the other terminal leaf, the notes read: "I will come as near to lying, as you can drive a coach and four. If it isn't thus and so with me, it is with something. 119". The second note on this page, which has been partially erased, reads thus: "I love society so much that I swallowed it all at a gulp - that is, all that came in my way. 139".

It should be noted that the reference to page 119 regarding the first of the two quotations in this note by Channing appears to be erroneous. The note apparently is a quotation, with minor variation in punctuation, taken from page 98 of the book.

It would be a pleasure to exhibit Channing's copy of the volume to interested members of The Thoreau Society. Bismarck, North Dakota

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- A lack of surprise at the virtues of this biography of Thoreau must not prevent our gratification and praise. Professor Harding has completed an essential and long undone work. Why it has so long been undone is clear to any reader who understands the expert and tireless research Harding has engaged in. "A man will turn over half a library to make one book," said Dr. Johnson. Only Harding knows what he has turned over--surely more than half a library of letters, journals, newspapers, memoirs, autobiographies, learned monographs, antiquarian items, etc., etc., etc., and so on.
- There are no critical or interpretative bombshells here. Harding has written, as the title promises, a detailed account of when Thoreau did what, saw and talked with whom, went where, and (to some extent) felt and thought how. Harding has searched out, sieved, used, and

ordered innumerable facts as only a master of them could.

At last we have a detailed chronology of Thoreau's days. It is not so rigidly organized as Rusk's Emerson - there are over-laps and backtrackings - but it is still a perfectly clear and dependable record to which the general reader or scholar can go for indispensable information.

As never before, we have gathered together full and adequately dated accounts of his teaching, pencil and graphite manufacturing, surveying, and championing of John Brown, to mention only a few of the important aspects of Thoreau's life.

Another virtue of the work is that Harding does not seek to prove Thoreau wiser or more saintly than he was, nor does he suggest impenetrable murky depths or spin diaphanous theories that cannot be decently floated save on unscholarly breezes. He lays out with great success the graph of affection, irritation, and mature acceptance in the Emerson-Thoreau friendship; equally clear-headed are his recitals of Thoreau's wooing of Ellen Sewall, his "refusal" of Sophia Foord, and his idealizing devotion for Lydian Emerson. His comment (p.418) that Thoreau might not have endorsed John Brown had he known of the Pottawatomie massacre is characteristic of his thoughtful approach. Harding has laid out the many-faceted life that Thoreau lived better than anyone else ever has.

The following points might be pendant, nit-picking in another context, but not, I think, in view of Harding's introductory remark: "I have tried wherever possible to pin my statements down to specific facts and to cite sources of my facts, reducing speculation to a minimum. However, I have not hesitated at times to introduce what I was almost certain was apocryphal . . . but I have labelled all such statements as apocryphal." But the number of unannotated items from Thoreau's journals and other sources are considerable: for example, p.182, contents of hut (Huntington MS?); p.340, correspondence with the Abbe Rouquette (letters?); p.356, conversation with villager (journal?). As for legend (unlabeled), what is the authority for Thoreau's having "borrowed" Thoreau's Pope's Homer, p.191; when and how did "twenty-five to thirty people fit inside the tiny cabin 15 by 10 feet at one time." p.195; and what kind of authority is the *Ladies Home Journal* (1943) for an otherwise unsupported item on Thoreau's invention of raisin-bread, p.183?

But *The Days of Thoreau* is a most important and impressive work. Only Walter Harding could have written it; we are most fortunate that he did. —J. Lyndon Shanley  
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- THE 1966 ANNUAL MEETING. . .
- The annual meeting of the Thoreau Society will be held on Saturday, July 9, 1966, in the First Parish Church in Concord, Mass. Professor Raymond Adams will be speaker of the day and Mrs. Gladys Hosmer will deliver the presidential address on "The Resident Amateur." Further details of the meeting will be announced in the spring bulletin.
- NOMINATIONS. . .
- The nominating committee (Albert Bussewitz, Eric Parkman Smith, and Laurence E. Richardson--chairman) have submitted the following slate of officers to be voted on at the annual meeting in July: Russell Rady (Montreal, Que.), president; Reginald L. Cook (Middlebury, Vt.), president-elect; Robert F. Needham (Concord, Mass.), vice-president; Walter Harding (Geneseo, N.Y.), secretary-treasurer; and Brooks Atkinson (New York City) Reginald L. Cook, and Leonard F. Kleinfeld (Forest Hills, N.Y.), members of the executive committee.
- The following have recently become life members of the Thoreau Society: August Derleth, Sauk City, Wisc.; Charles Foster, Minneapolis, Minn.; Ralph Griffin, Weston, Mass.; Lois Grim, New York City; Lauriat Lane, Fredericton, N.B.; Ross Neal, Canistota, New York; Edwin Stockton, Jr., Radford, Va.; and E.H. Walker, Boise, Idaho. Life memberships are \$25.00.